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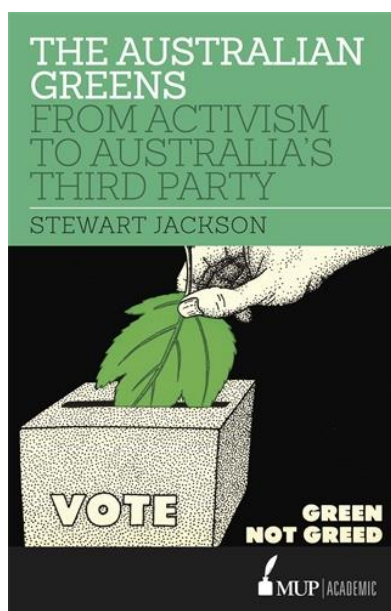
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Book Review

Stewart Jackson, *The Australian Greens: From Activism to Australia's Third Party*.
Melbourne University Press, 2016.
ISBN 9780522867930

Lars Jensen

If I had been asked to review a book on one of the establishment parties—the Liberal Party, the Australian Labor Party or the National Party—I probably would have been reluctant. But my curiosity about the Australian Greens as a party formation and the evolution of the party's entangled history from the single-issue environmental campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s into “the third party” of Australian politics left me with little choice in the matter. The Australian Greens in my view represent an exciting change in a frozen political system which in Australia, and more generally in the “West,” appears to have entered a vicious cycle of electoral non confidence and perpetual leadership crisis. In other words, to me, Jackson's book is a both timely and important contribution to help us better understand the shifts in Australian politics over the last few decades. Shifts which will probably become an even more prominent feature in years to come.

Perhaps what is often missed in readings of the shifting—and at times shifty—contemporary political landscape is how much the major parties have also changed, and to what extent this explains an increasingly desperate electorate looking for alternatives to what it perceives, in my view rightfully so, as political machinery and spin doctors replacing visions and convictions. The question, which remains after having read Jackson's book, is how much it is the further erosion of an always already skeptic Australian electorate that has led to the rise of alternative political formations and to what extent the Australian Greens *are* the productive catalyser of democratic renewal. Not that the Australian Greens, as Jackson clearly shows, could have been just any political formation. But the tiredness of political deals made behind closed doors effectively making a mockery of the fundamental idea of democracy as the result of open dialogue would presumably be instrumental in motivating a movement becoming a party to search for more inclusive ways of producing candidates and policy agendas. Hence to detail the evolution of the Australian Greens from movement(s) to party entails looking at the bureaucracy, the techniques and technicalities, the party soldiers, the

apparatus and the “apparatchiks” of the process. Something which Jackson’s book does with great attention to detail, referencing surveys, interviews, etc., all of which help to understand how the transformation of the Greens has affected various stakeholders in the movement.

The other side of the process that could be labelled the “cultural baggage” of the Greens occupies a less central position in the book. Questions that deserve more attention include how the Australian Greens evolved as the result of various at times sporadic campaigns, in other instances as mass movements with roots in the Anti-War and anti-nuclear demonstrations in the 1960s as Australia faced radical upheaval along with the rest of the West. How did these various movements tie in and not tie in with developments elsewhere in the country? How did the movements transform themselves into a political party as a response to what events in Australia? What questions have governed the Greens historically, and what questions have dominated the Greens’ agenda—and how are these questions the result of discursive formations in contemporary Australia? To take just one obvious and recent example; is the Greens’ preoccupation with the inhumane treatment of refugees separable from the ways in which the main political parties have caved in to their own refugee hostile rhetoric? Is it an opportune position to take because it is avoided by the others? Hardly, since everywhere in the West, only masochists would take up the role of championing the rights of the dismissed in the prevailing atmosphere of myopic nationalism. What I am addressing here is how the Greens may be understood as a movement/political party driven by convictions, driven by a belief in democracy as derived from discussions held across society that entails the move away from clique politics, even as the Greens were transforming themselves into a political party.

One of the unresolved questions haunting Jackson’s book is then whether the transformation from movement to political party requires playing by rules set up by the establishment, which is not only in Australia a conservative system—it is just particularly conservative here—or whether we have in fact reached a point where any alternative not understood on terms defined by the apparatus of the established parties will get voters’ attention, because they see the current political establishment as governed by clientelism. Jackson’s chosen approach means that after reading his book we still don’t know when to explain the rise of the Greens as a party formation growing out of the 1960s and 1970s anti-establishment movements and when their recent success (on a federal level) needs to be explained in the wake of 9/11 and Tampa and its ensuing rise of an intolerant Liberalism chipping away at the foundation (or to be more critical—the remains) of an always compromised inclusive society. Even if these questions are huge and probably beyond the scope of any book on any particular party, from a non-political science apparatus reader such as myself, these questions have such huge implications for how we might begin to understand the rise and transformation of the Australian Greens. And why only the Australian Greens? The many references in the book to Greens elsewhere most notably the German Greens suggest there is some wider issue here about the endemic political crisis of late modern Western societies that needs to be addressed. Just as it needs to be acknowledged that “green issues” in Europe are not the same as “green issues” in Australia—for many reasons. Even if the process of coming to terms with the scale of environmental degradation in Europe and Australia shares many features.

The Australian Greens: From Activism to Australia’s Third Party delivers insights into the convoluted process of turning a movement into a political party. It provides detailed research on the challenges faced in a country of vulnerable, environmentally conscious communities spread across a vast continent. And it carries out important work in challenging the idea that everything in Australia can be explained with reference to Australia only. And through this

Jackson also gives food for thought regarding the similarities between the process of political party formation in Australia and elsewhere. My review of Jackson's book is hopefully both analytical and refreshingly partisan. Or to put it differently, if I lived in Australia I would clearly vote for the Greens. Not because of a belief in the Australian Greens' inherited pledge from the Australian Democrats "to keep the bastards honest" (also quoted in Jackson), but simply because the bastards are bastards. If truth is the first casualty of war then honesty is the first casualty of "professional" political parties governed by managerialism and insatiable desires for social control. The Australian Greens by default represents the only major political force in Australia trying to change this.